

Naaman

2 Kings 5: 1 – 14

Makemie Presbyterian Church

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¹Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. ²Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. ³She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." ⁴So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. ⁵And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel." He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. ⁶He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy."

⁷When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me

to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me.”⁸ But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, “Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.”

⁹ So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha’s house. ¹⁰ Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, “Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.” ¹¹ But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, “I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! ¹² Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?” He turned and went away in a rage. ¹³ But his servants approached and said to him, “Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, ‘Wash, and be clean’?” ¹⁴ So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

A few minutes ago we heard the story of Naaman the Syrian, whose main claim to fame is that Jesus mentioned him in a sermon once (Luke 4:27). His story is found in the book of Kings, which is just what it sounds like – a history of the kings of Israel, from David to Zedekiah. Naaman shows up about halfway through in the ninth century before Christ, when Jehoam was king of Israel. Although Israel and her neighbor Aram (which we know as Syria) were frequently at war, they were momentarily at peace. Aram had the better army, however, and Israel knew it. Israel even knew the name of the commander of the Aramean army, since he had beaten up on them more than once. His name was Naaman, which means “pleasant” an unlikely name for a warrior, perhaps – but even his enemies admitted that Naaman was a great man, whom God had favored in battle. Think Colin Powell, only with one important difference. Naaman did not photograph well. He had leprosy, which was not a big a problem for a Syrian as it might have been for a Jew, but which ate away at Naaman in more ways than one.

He was a national hero, for goodness' sake. He had an office with a view at the Aramean Pentagon. He hobnobbed with heads of state, but there was always that awkward moment when he met

people for the first time. Some handled their surprise well, but others stared at him or looked quickly away. He had learned the hard way about shaking hands. It was better to offer a slight bow, he found, with both hands clasped behind his back. That way he didn't have to watch the other person decide whether or not to be brave when he held out his scabby hand. He was so tired of the question that registered on their faces.

Good Lord, is that stuff contagious? Poor guy. It must be awful to have to deal with that. Why doesn't he just stay home & spare himself the grief? But their questions were nothing compared to his own. If God favored him, then why was he sick? And why couldn't anyone in Aram make him well?

Naaman's help came from a source he never expected – a young Jewish girl who had been taken captive during one of his military raids on Israel. She was the least of the least in Aram – a slave, a child, a girl. The book of Kings does not even give her a name, but she was the one who led Naaman to his cure. She did not speak directly to him – he was far too scary for that – but she spoke to his wife, whom she served. “If only my Lord were with the prophet who is

in Samaria!” she said to her mistress one day. “He would cure him of his leprosy!”

It was a preposterous suggestion. When the king’s own physicians had failed to do Naaman any good, he was supposed to go hunting for a faith healer in Israel on the advice of a pre-adolescent serving girl? It was preposterous, but Naaman jumped right on it. If you have ever been that sick yourself then you understand why. Once you run out of respectable doctors, having done everything they said – once you have taken the pills, applied the poultices, practiced the twenty minutes of positive imaging a day & nothing has changed – well, if someone tells you about a clinic in Mexico where a doctor with a degree in veterinary medicine has discovered a substance that works wonders on humans, there is a good chance you will get in your car & go there. It may sound preposterous, but if you really, really want to get well, then you cannot afford to leave any stone unturned – even if the stone turns out to be a holy man in Israel.

As soon as Naaman’s wife told him what the serving girl had said, he went to see the king of Aram, who was happy to oblige his star general. “Go then,” the king said to him, “and I will send along a

letter to the king of Israel.” Naaman took the letter & went home to pack. Since he had no idea what a cure for leprosy cost, he emptied his bank account, loading his chariots with seven hundred fifty pounds of silver & one hundred fifty pounds of gold, plus ten sets of fine clothes. Then he kissed his wife goodbye & set off for Israel, where he presented his letter to the king.

“When this letter reaches you,” it said, “know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy.” It was a nice gesture, however misguided. The problem was that Naaman’s boss, the king of Aran, didn’t understand about real power. He thought the king of Israel was the man to see – that if there was a cure available in Israel then the king would most certainly know about it. Only the king didn’t know about it, because the only kinds of power he had were political power & military power. He didn’t know one thing about healing power – the power of God – which was why he got so upset when he read the letter.

The first thing he did, before he told anyone what it said, was to grab his royal robe & tear it right down the middle. Then he howled out loud. “Am I God, to give death or life,” he said, “that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy?” It sounded like a

trap to him. The king of Aram had asked him to do something he couldn't do so that Aram would have an excuse to declare war on Israel. It was all politics to him because politics was all he knew.

Word of the king's distress got around town pretty quickly. When Elisha – the prophet the little Jewish serving girl knew about, even though the king of her country didn't – when Elisha heard about it, he sent a message to the king. "Why have you torn your clothes?" he asked. "Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel."

Well, that might not have been a strange message at the time, but it sounds pretty strange now. Who would think of going to a prophet for a cure? For a prediction about the future, maybe, or for a hair-raising sermon on the righteousness of God, but for help with a skin disease? What a strange idea.

But as I said, before, when you really, really want to get well, you'll try anything. So Naaman got directions to Elisha's house & went there. Then he lined up all his horses & chariots in the front yard & waited for the prophet to come out. What was the protocol exactly? Should he approach Elisha or let Elisha approach him? Was he supposed to kneel or something? He hoped not. Yes, kneeling was

out of the question. He would offer a slight bow, with his hands clasped behind his back. “Good sir,’ he would say, “I am General Naaman, commander of the army for the king of Aram.” Now, that would set the proper tone. Then he could soften up a little. “I have heard so much about you. I come with high hopes & quite a lot of money besides. I’m prepared to pay anything you ask for your services.”

While Naaman was still rehearsing his speech, the door to Elisha’s house opened & a messenger came out. “Go wash in the Jordan seven times,” the man said to Naaman, “and your flesh shall be restored & you shall be clean.” Naaman was so surprised that he hardly heard what the man said. What kind of shabby welcome was this? Where was Elisha, the man of God? At the very least, he owed his visitor a seat in the shade & a cup of cool water. Couldn’t he even come out of his house & say hello?

Naaman was furious. He had fully expected Elisha to come out to him – there in the yard – to say some grand words, to make some grand gesture, so that Naaman was cured in a spectacle that no one watching would ever forget. Instead, he was being sent away by a messenger, to go splash in the shallow muddy Jordan River like a

five-year-old boy – he! General Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, with nine hundred pounds of gold & silver in his luggage!

It was too much. It was too, too much. “Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?” he spat out. “Could I not wash in them, and be clean?” He turned and went away in a rage.

But his servants must have known him pretty well – well enough to know that he was more hurt than mad – because they tiptoed up to him & convinced him to give it a try. *If he had given you something hard to do, you would have done it*, they reasoned with him. *So he gave you something simple. So?*

It was the beginning of Naaman’s cure. He was completely emptied out. His royal connections had gotten him nowhere. His reputation had gotten him nowhere. His bags full of money had gotten him nowhere. Elisha would not even come out of the house to meet him & now he had been given this supremely stupid thing to do – to strip down in front of all his men & take the world’s longest bath in a river that barely came up to his knees.

But because he really, really wanted to get well, he did it. He left his clothes & shoes on the bank. He picked his way through the rocks to the deepest part of the river, where the current bumped against his body like soft pillows. The water was greenish & smelled of fish. There was nothing remotely sacred about it. Naaman found a place to kneel & sank down for the first time. IT was cold under the water but not on the top of it. He didn't dare look at his skin. Seven times he made the passage from cold to hot, from river to sun. Each time he rose he sucked air like a newborn. Then he went down again with his eyes wide open so that the sky wrinkled & turned green as the water. He tried not to think of anything but the numbers. By the seventh time he was winded. He was also very clean. When he looked down at his skin, the saw the flesh of a five year old. It was smooth. It was fresh. He was well.

Later on he tried to pay Elisha, but Elisha wouldn't hear of it. "Your money's no good here," he told Naaman. "God works for free."

All Naaman had to do was follow directions. All he had to do was empty himself out, abandoning the pretense that who he was or what he was worth could get him what he needed. All he had to do was strip himself down until his hurt flesh was exposed for everyone

to see & go play in the water like a little boy. Then God did for him what military victories & kings & bags of money could never do. God restored his flesh. God created him all over again & he was made new.

I could explain this story to death, but I don't think I will. But the next time you are saying your prayers, will you remember this great, leprous man Naaman, whose wealth & power turned out to be useless to him in his search for health & who was ready to trade it all in when God surprised him with a cure; that made him truly free.

Amen.